Emergent Issues in African Philosophy: A Dialogue with Kwasi Wiredu

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These are major excerpts from an interview that was conducted with Professor Wiredu at Rhodes University during the thirteenth Annual Conference of The International Society for African Philosophy and Studies (April 3, 2007). He speaks on a wide range of issues, such as political and personal identity, racism and tribalism, moral foundations, the golden rule, African communalism, human rights, personhood, consensus, and meta-philosophy, among other critical themes.

We are also offered what may be considered Wiredu's definition of what constitutes "African Philosophy." For Wiredu, African philosophy ought not necessarily be put in contrast to Western philosophy. African philosophy must be understood within the context of its emergence with its associative socio-cultural and political milieu. Philosophy has no borders, by which he encourages a wide breadth of investigation into different intellectual traditions and an openness to learn from other traditions. He emphasized, however, that there are basic human questions concerning a people that can only be answered by embedded knowledge within their indigenous thought systems. It is reductionist to conceive of African philosophy as merely "ethnophilosophy" because the body of knowledge of what constitutes African philosophy is a critical investigation that negotiates between a series of intellectual traditions evolving from Africa, including those discarded as mere myths and those considered as products of modernity. The authority of African philosophy is the ability to create meaning for a culturally differentiated society, meanings that are not anachronistic but relevant to the sociopolitical and economic condition of the people. African philosophy does indeed have critical resources in dealing with the challenges of democratization, party politics, and nation-building in Africa.

With regards to moral judgment, Wiredu's leitmotif is the golden rule—a procedural standard to judge what action is right or wrong that is an invitation to a subjective empathy. Here Wiredu argues for a subjective reciprocity when it comes to norms and other certain conventions, and he interestingly sides with Menkiti in the famous Gyekye versus Menkiti debate.

Eze: *Thank you, professor, for this wonderful opportunity. I begin by asking if you could state more clearly for us your position on the issues of community and individualism, that is, the debate on the primacy of either the community or individual in the African thought system. Of course I presume you do not agree with Menkiti's radical communitarianism...*

Wiredu: (cuts in) Which scholar is that? No, it is Gyekye who does not agree with Menkiti. I do not believe that Menkiti said anything extremely radical. Menkiti's position is that to be a person in Africa, you need to not just be born of human heritage, you need also to have achieved certain socio-ethical standards. You need ethical maturity, you need to achieve certain standard morally. That ethical maturity defined in terms of the mores and ethics of the society. Gyekye objects to this because Menkiti seems to be saying that the individual does not have any standing and this leads to extreme communitarianism. But this is absolutely not the case; Menkiti didn't say that the individual is not appraised and is not given any room. In any culture, you are going to have concepts that in terms of which you appraise human actions. This doesn't make the country, the nation, or the culture authoritarian. I mean, what is a bad person according to Menkiti in African culture? Right? Instead of saying bad person we could say not a person at all. And you are not a person if you have not attained certain moral capabilities and so on. Now... if you go to Western culture [pause] get me the most individualistic society in the Western world, you are still going to have concepts of a bad man and a good man. When that man goes about stealing eggs, he is a bad man alright, and being bad is defined by the society only in the indirect sense of being defined by the concepts that are used in a given language. This does not make you an extreme communitarian or anything. I think that criticism of Menkiti is just flat wrong.

Eze: *Thank you! I was just about to quote you in one of your writings where you seem to argue that "the concept of a person is 'social' before it is anything else; personhood is not an automatic quality." I am wondering about the place of human rights in this context, or where you would place human rights in this African intellectual context? What about individual uniqueness?*

Wiredu: And what connection does that have with human rights? Let's say that to be a person is not just to be born into the human society. It doesn't mean that you are to be treated in one way or the other. You see, whether it is going to be authoritarian or not is going to depend on the criteria themselves, the rules that are adopted in the language, in the culture. If in the culture there is a rule that anybody that doesn't belong to the royal society can defect anytime, that is what makes the society authoritarian. It is the laws and rules that are in force in the society. It is not the idea that in order to be a good person you ought to have the a, b, c, d qualifications.

Eze: *So in your view personhood in this African system of thinking is not a given but acquired?*

Wiredu: It is not a given, you have to acquire it.

Metz: *I think, maybe, what is going on here is the assumption that to be a person is*

equivalent to having a moral status, and I take Professor Wiredu to be denying that. Is that a fair assessment?

Wiredu: I might strengthen that even more by pointing out that in the ontology of a person, here we are describing the ethical concept. In the ontology of a person, every person is supposed to have a little bit of divine sustenance in themselves that is what gives you, in the Akan, what is called the "Okra," which is what gives you life. And, that is supposed to be something that comes directly from God and it is supposed to be a speck of divine sustenance itself. So, if you go and kill an individual, you have killed... a being that has that sustenance. Moreover, in the Akan language, the word that represents a person is "onipa," and there are two meanings for *onipa.* One, it just means a being of a human heritage. But in context of social commentary, we have the second concept of a person, that is the normative one. So we have those concepts; we have two words. So there is an ambiguity; but if you just paid a little attention to context, you won't have any trouble. While the context is social commentary, when you say, "oh, such and such is no *onipa* at all," you are commenting on how well or bad he has been doing basically and socially. Moreover, very often, the remark "he is no *onipa"* is of regret and not criticism. When people begin to think that you are no longer *onipa-kra*, they will now stop moral criticisms and try to help you, they will try to get help for you. Frequently, they will suspect that there are some evil spirits at work and so they need to do something about it. But whatever, whether that is valid or not, the point is that "he is not a person" is not necessarily a criticism, a kind of adverse commentary. It can only be a criticism of course that that is where a person starts going the wrong way. Somebody has started drinking, and he is just drinking, and people will try to stop him and say "look, this is terrible, don't do it, don't do it!" But when he has become a complete addict, they will cease the criticism and will try to help, and the help is designed to try to recover, to try to regain, to help him regain his personhood.

Eze: *I take you back to the issue of consensus in the African system of thought. You gave us a motif of a crocodile that has two heads struggling for food. If only they know that the food goes into the same stomach they will not struggle for it. This is how you explained the process of ethical decision among the Akan and how they arrive at consensus. But don't you think that consensus does not accommodate every particular viewpoint? In this sense, consensus is somewhat likened to a totalitarian unanimity, and I am wondering whether you would rather substitute the crocodile example with a kind of a realist perspectivism when you consider, for example, Lyotard's critique of Habermasian consensus. Or would your use of consensus be any different from that of Habermas? If not, don't you think that this Kantian foundation and orientation stifles individual liberty to some extent?*

Wiredu: I speak of decisional consensus. Consensus when it comes to what to do. It is important to distinguish between decisional consensus and cognitive consensus. When people are debating issues in the parliament and so on, there is the issue of what are the consequences of that decision going to be and so on. These are cognitive questions. There will be differences of what the properties of the thing in question are. Okay, this is one type of question. But we can also discuss the question of what to do in advance. A consensus

society is one in which people can agree about what to do even though they disagree on some issues about what ought to be done or what can be done. So the question of consensus should not be identified with unanimity. There is going to be unanimity only regarding what is to be done, not unanimity regarding what ought to be done. Now, unanimity regarding what is to be done is obviously not an easy thing to achieve. I think that in a society, in order to gain something like that, it is going to be shown that serious attention will be given; serious and respectful attention will be given to all those who hold opinions that are at stake, that are concerned in the discussion. People need to be practicing that. Now, in some of the things I have written about consensus, I have suggested that at least in some African countries, there is a history of consensus, the operation of consensus in decision-making. I know that these societies are supposed to have been simple societies, and so consensus may have been easy for society of that kind but not in contemporary societies. I have heard that criticism. That criticism does not impress me much, but at least it grasps the point one is making that in traditional societies it is possible for people to take decisions about what is to be done, take that decision unanimously. Now, people were ready to accede to certain decisions even if they seem to be based on cognitive assumptions which they did not agree with. The hope was that perhaps the time will come when they will also be in situations whence they are not the ones making the concessions but others are. As for the complexity of modern society, that is true, but you know people even in the simplest societies, people can get into disagreement upon matters about which they feel strongly. The difference is going to be whether we have had a practice in consensus decision-making.

Eze: *You have written a lot and influenced many African thinkers. Many young African scholars look up to you for direction in some areas. I am just wondering what critical resources do you think or suggest that we can draw from African philosophy and African ethics for contemporary multicultural society, including politics. What can African philosophy do for multiculturalism? A country like Nigeria, for example, has over 300 languages and ethnicities. What intellectual capital can we draw from African philosophy in terms of multiculturalism?*

Wiredu: Well, to just connect with what we just said, I think that our politics which we have now are based on foreign models; they don't encourage unity, they don't. Many African countries are made up of one large ethnic group and a number of smaller groups. In Ghana, the Akans constitute almost half of the population and then you have other groups. We have at least forty-six languages. Now, if you adopt a majoritarian system, then one tribe is going to be in power all the time—one tribe or one ethnic group. In this case, the Akans are going to be in power because they are the majority, and the other groups are not going to be happy about this. This has happened in many African countries. You can't get people to adhere to a setting of that kind with constant happiness when they know that they are always in the minority. And the thing that makes it so serious is that, remember that these countries like Ghana, et cetera are artificial entities that the colonialists put together. So, people do have, if not necessarily a very conscious sense, they have somehow a subconscious sense of identity which is prior to the sense of that national identity as that of the whole of Ghana or whole of Nigeria. So, if we are operating a majoritarian system, you are going to inflame this possibility of what is called "tribalism". Tribalism would cause one

group killing thousands of thousands of other groups. I think that the majoritarian system in Africa is a disaster; it is going to be a disaster. Even when they have not resulted in killing people, it is nasty enough. Go to Ghana, Ghanaians are very peaceful people, but go to Ghana and see the kind of opposition that is there. Well, I am not speaking against the "opposition" as such but the kind of relationship that exists between what is called the opposition and what is called government. So, can't they think of a better system? Where perhaps they cannot now because they are under constraints from foreign powers. When African military men completed the destruction of their economies, then they had to appeal to Western powers, and they said, "Okay, we can give you some money but you have to adopt this method," a method that they think works well for them, though I marvel at why they cannot think of a better system than the one I can see in the U.S.A. They are imposing that on their people and many of them are convinced or go by it, but it is nasty the way it operates.... I think we should try hard to discover the form of democracy that is suited to our situation in Africa, with careful study of our traditions and a careful application of common sense and logic. The present situation is that we in Africa are being forced to operate a certain kind of democracy that is party democracy. This came about in the following way: We have had many coups in Africa. These military leaders would regard African economies as booty and destroyed the economies completely with their civilian friends. So, they needed help to revive the economy and they will then go to the World Bank, IMF, and organizations like that. And they said, "Okay, nice, we are prepared to give you some money but you have to do a, b, c, d," and this included party politics and abolition of spending on social services.... Multiparty democracy may be good for some countries, but perhaps it is not good for all countries. It may not be good for countries in a situation of small and large ethnic groups. When this happens, the majoritarian system will enable the dominant ethnic group to be in power all the time, and other ethnic groups, being peripheral to power, and they get disaffected and, if they have a captain or a colonel, one morning they take over. This has been happening. We need a form of democracy that corresponds in some way to our own culture. That is a question that is not discussed, yet it is a question African philosophers ought to discuss and ought to try to do something about.

But you asked me what Africans can derive from their traditions? I think they can derive some very important things. In African tradition, I do not know of any African group who are proselytizers, who go about trying to get people out of darkness. "These people are in darkness and we need to bring them light"—I have never heard of it. And, definitely, Akans don't have it. We say in Akan, nobody teaches a child God. But we do have skeptics in our tradition, people who don't believe in God, in spirits and so on. But it is your own business. Nobody is going to persecute you because you don't believe in so and so metaphysical concept of the world. If you don't believe, it is almost unintelligible for an Akan to go about and say you must believe as I believe. Now, I think this is not only good for the nation, but for the whole world that what you believe—in metaphysics, in a religion, and so on—is your own business. Too, you don't go about trying to get people by all means to believe in your belief. This is what is going on right now in the world, the people who want the whole world to believe what they believe. When you have people in opposing camps believing the same kind of thing and wanting the whole world to believe what they believe, they will fight, which also you can see if you just look. I think this is one positive thing about Africa. I will write more on that, on morality and religion. Whereas in the orthodox books,

you find it said that African morality is based on religion. All that is very deeply mistaken, and I think it ought to be brought out and explained that one thing about African society is that morality is not dependent on anything supernatural. Moreover, the concept of supernatural itself does not make sense in any African worldview that I have knowledge of. Certainly not in the Akan worldview. These are things that perhaps if the time comes, when people can look at African philosophy seriously, then perhaps when they look at it, they will see that these are lessons they can learn. I think that now, many places in the U.S.A. and in Europe, people are now paying attention to African Philosophy and that is fine. But I do not think that we have reached a stage where somebody will look at African philosophy and say, "Let's see if we can learn something from it." The idea is, "Oh okay, so these people have these ideas and so on." That is it. We have not reached that stage. When I read Western Philosophy, I also read to see what I can get from it. Can I get something from it? I think I get a lot from philosophers like John Dewey. He is extremely wise and not a great stylist when it comes to his technical writing, but actually he can write nicely when it comes to social commentary and things like that. I read Dewey; I can get stuff from Dewey. When I read any philosophy like that, I read it for what I can get. I may learn something from it. I don't know that too many people approach African philosophy from that standpoint, for perhaps they can learn something from it. But when the time comes, that will be one thing they will learn, one of the things they will learn from African philosophy because up till now, I would say that the orthodox belief among Christians is that morality is the command of God. That is essentially an infantile kind of outlook on morality.

A time will come when perhaps people will note that from Africa, you can learn something about morality, and this is extremely important. There are very strong features of our cultures that we can bring out clearly from which other people can learn. I believe that our cultures are extremely open-minded about things like belief. African people don't go about trying to bring people to light. We don't suppose that other people are in darkness where we are to give them light. Metaphysics and belief in God and stuff like that, these are left to individuals. The claim that Africans are religious, that everything is religious about Africa, that is a misjudgment. Africans are very relaxed about big metaphysical beliefs like creation of the world out of nothing. Indeed, I doubt whether such concepts are expressible in Africa. That attitude is personal. As mentioned, we say in Akan, you don't teach a child God, which suggests that anybody who can think can figure those things out for themselves. But if one doesn't believe, it is his own business. This is something we can teach the world because lots of people, persons, and nations believe that their metaphysics should be accepted by all. And they believe that they have revelations. Revelations in any African system that I know about, if there is any sort of revelation, it is a very limited kind of empirical revelation. Let's say that that there is a spirit and someone has lost some eggs and the spirit reveals that this one stole it rather than that one. We have many such spirits like that, and it can be refuted. There are times they can be refuted, and if the god is constantly refuted, it can be killed. Just by averting your attention from it and by scorning it, it dies. Talking about such revelation, one in which God told you last night and so on, we don't have something like that. This is extremely important because it seems to me that a lot of conflict today in the world is due to the fact that some people have revelation from God, apparently, and others have opposite revelation, they can only fight. I think Africans can teach the world stuff like that.

Metz: *I wonder when that will ever happen because I have the same feeling that Indian philosophy has a long history and I still think that in the West people don't take the attitude that you take to Western philosophy. Even though it has a long tradition, for the most part Western academics don't read non-Western philosophy to see what they can get out of it.*

Wiredu: Yea, that is very true. However, people like the Indians are in a stronger position than Africa because a long time ago, the West did recognize that they do have a tradition of philosophy, a long traditional philosophy, and there are many specialists, many Western scholars that are specialists in Eastern philosophy. Even so, you are right. Indian philosophy or Chinese philosophy is not something that Western students take for what they can learn from it. It is a kind of touristic spirit.

Eze: *Don't you think that this kind of attitude to non-Western philosophy has to do with postcolonial discourse, the whole orientation towards Africa? And why do you interrogate the reason of such discourse, considering people like Kant, Hegel, and Hume, who were all sons of the Enlightenment with its celebration of rationality as core of humanity, but a virtue not extended to the Africans whom they disqualified as humans worthy of any rational capacity?*

Wiredu: It is not postcolonial, it is colonial. You mentioned Hume and so on. It is something that is going on for a long time. It is not something that happened after colonialism. It is racism that has been in the tradition for a long time. One surprising thing is that while chaps like Hegel and so on were saying nonsense about Africa, there were people there, Western philosophers, who knew that it was nonsense. There were lesser, weaker philosophers in Britain who were trying to dissuade Hume from his nonsense. So it is a very pressing kind of thing in the history of Western philosophy. When you say it is postcolonial, it was there before colonization, it was there during colonization, and it is there now. Though one begins to see the possibility that it will change. Definitely there have been changes, so now you have African Philosophy departments in many American universities, something you didn't have a few years ago.

Eze: *As an African student studying in Europe, sometimes I have a problem with identity. I have some crises especially when I am encountering an "other" European who simply sees me as African. I ask myself, who am I? Am I a Nigerian? An African? An Igbo? An Opi-Nsukka person? What constitutes my identity as an African? The inference from our conversation so far brings to my mind Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," and I wonder how this is applicable to understanding African identity, considering the fractured imaginaries of African cultural identities, identity Balkanized with colonization. Do you have that kind of experience when you have to struggle with your identity? For example, you see a fellow Ghanaian, and you are sitting and chatting, and then somebody from your Akan culture comes— [to] (YES]whom do you owe your obligation? Do you have an attachment to your tradition? To your Akan cultural heritage first before being a Ghanaian or a black person in Africa?*

Wiredu: I think this is the most difficult question that you have asked this afternoon. It depends on all kinds of situations. Suppose I am talking to my best friend who is a Ghanaian and who belongs to another ethnic group, and somebody who belongs to my ethnic groups comes. It does not create any new tension. Yes, this man is my best friend, but it doesn't mean that one from my ethnic group is going to be my best friend. That could happen with some African countries. In some African countries, tribalism is very strong, which is not the case in Ghana. It is there, we do have a certain amount of tribalism in Ghana, but it is not as great as that. So it won't make much difference as in the situation you imagined. I don't think so.

Metz: *I would like to talk about some of your ethical and political philosophy. I find a tension between two of the chapters in one of your books (Cultural Universals and Particulars—eds.). One chapter suggests that the end of all moral action is to promote the well-being of the individual. But in a later chapter, when you defend the idea of non-party politics, you don't appeal to that idea, you appeal to two other ideas: one about right to representation and another about promotion of harmony. And I wonder whether there is a tension between these two chapters. You would think that if you were going to justify non-party politics, you would have appealed to moral principles articulated earlier, which was a matter of improving people's quality of life. I find it interesting that you don't do that. Can you shed more light on that?*

Wiredu: The pursuit of human well-being, actually, is not moral at all. What is moral is the even-handed pursuit of human interest. Human interest based on some principles that enable us to take the interests of all in the given group into account. I suggested elsewhere that this principle is the golden rule. It is the golden rule that gives us the basis for equalization, to consider every person as one. When it comes to politics, I believe that the right to representation is a moral right. If based on the principle of human well-being, we take everyone as able, first of all, to have a confession of their own interest, and then we try to harmonize these interests with a principle which in the Western or Christian language has been called the "Golden Rule." I don't quite feel any sort of tension between the situations.

Metz: *So, that brings together the suggestion that the fundamental moral obligation is to promote well-being in an impartial way, and you say out of that follows a further right. On representation, can you shed more light on where harmony fits into that? Is it also derived from a more fundamental obligation to promote interests in an impartial way or is, rather, harmony the foundation?*

Wiredu: It is another way of referring to even-handedness. The harmony is promotion of human interest according to a principle that universalizes, which makes everyone count at once.

Metz: *But that sounds utilitarian, and I wonder whether you are happy with characterizing African ethics as a sort of "everybody counts for one." Everybody's interests matter and we sum up the total well-being and do whatever action is going to promote that. Is that a fair reflection of your judgment of African ethics?*

Wiredu: No, this is extremely interesting. J. S. Mill, who is best known traditionally for utilitarianism, I think is rather careless in formulating his theory. Usually when he wanted to give a short statement of his theory, he would say, according to his utilitarian principle, an action is good if it promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. That is a very absurd principle. When he is pressed, however, he would say that "my principle is no different from the principle of the son of man," which is a reference to the Golden Rule. So, when he is pressed, he appeals to the Golden Rule. I think that it is the presence of the Golden Rule in the system that makes it moral at all. If utilitarianism is the concept that Mill gave carelessly by appealing to the happiness of the greatest number, then that is quite useless. I am not a utilitarian, and I don't think that my people in Ghana or in Africa are utilitarian, but I think that, given that the Golden Rule is accorded its place there frequently, we have to, in addition to that, appeal to some principle of the greatest happiness.

Metz: *Now, I am skeptical about the Golden Rule. I had never thought of African ethics as being able to be captured primarily by that principle. I am wondering whether you are happy with some of the apparent implications of that principle. So you might say that one implication is that it is always wrong to punish people. If you want people to treat you as you want to be treated, virtually no one wants to be punished. Clearly there is a strong strain in African thinking that the point of criminal justice should be some kind of reconciliation between the offender and the community or the ancestors. However, I wonder whether it goes too far to suggest that punishment as such is incompatible with that approach.*

Wiredu: The Golden Rule sounds very simple. It isn't at all. It often raises questions of interpretations. Your reference to punishment just reminds me of a teacher I had who was extremely opposed to Kant. And one way in which he used to ridicule Kant was the categorical imperative. He would say, ""The world is going to be hot crazy indeed if, in order to kiss my wife, I had to agree that everybody can kiss her." You can see the problem here in interpretation. When it comes to punishment, it is also a problem of interpretation, and I think I would like others who are in trouble to be punished, but I wouldn't like myself to be punished... We need to state the principle fairly clearly before we can see if it makes sense within the context of the Golden Rule. It does not occur to me easily how one can formulate with this slight degree of precision a rule that permits any human being to be in favor of punishment when it is the other people that are being punished, and against it when that person himself is going to be punished.

Metz: *That sounds right, but the worry is that that the Golden Rule commits you to thinking that no punishment is justified for anyone because no individual himself wants to be punished. And the ground of how you should treat others according to the Golden Rule is what you yourself would want, or do you have a different understanding of the Golden Rule?*

Wiredu: Yes. What you want is an exact reversal of situation. Golden Rule is an exact reversal. Suppose you are going to do something that is going to affect other people. Reverse the situation and put yourself in the situation of the person who was originally going to suffer

and the consequences of your action. In that situation, let us know whether you approve it or not.

Metz: *By that token, suppose we have a rapist and I am the judge, and I am going to apply the Golden Rule. I ask myself whether I can mete out any punishment and how severe the punishment can be. I put myself in the rapist's position and I am thinking if I'd rather be punished at all. Am I not committed as a judge to acquit him?*

Wiredu: Again, it is a problem of interpretation, which I think can even be made clear. Even more dramatic is to take the case of a child. The principle is not to put yourself in the position of a child and think like a child. No, put yourself in a position and think as you are able to think now and judge whether you will like it. If the position or idea was to put yourself in the position of a child and judge like a child, then you get into that kind of situation. But put yourself there and judge like a mature person. That is what the principle requires.

Metz: *Now I am worried that when we start bringing in issues of judging reasonably, what we are implicitly doing is smuggling in another moral principle.*

Wiredu: No, I wonder, unless we could bring in the ideas like to "judge maturely," we could not even think of principles. How can you state a principle governing human behavior if we cannot assume that the subjects are reasonable or being reasonable in a general sense of being rational? Then I will agree with you that we cannot have a principle like the Golden Rule, but we cannot have any principle whatever. I cannot see any prospect of any moral principle in that situation.

Metz: *Well, we need to suppose that people are acting for reasons and are responsive to reasons, but I take the job of a moral theory to give us an account of what the good moral reasons are, and one way of summing them up is the Golden Rule, or is supposed to be. But now the Golden Rule says treat others as you would like to have them treat you insofar as you are reasonable or mature. That is awfully close to saying treat others as you would want to be treated insofar as you are morally upright. In which case we need to get some other moral account of what it is that is morally upright or virtuous. And the Golden Rule is supposed to provide that on its own.*

Wiredu: But I think that you are conflating rationality, say, something like cognitive rationality with moral rationality. If we do that, we cannot define any moral concept idea. We have to assume that we do have sort of general intelligence and rationality.

Metz: *Let me switch gears a little bit because I am also curious about how to get from the Golden Rule to the right to representation that grounds non-party politics. So if I start with the principle that I am to treat others as I would like to be treated, at least insofar as I am mature, there is some gap between that and the claim that I would necessarily want a say in every decision that a legislature makes. Why think that follows, as opposed to having an equal opportunity to influence the parliamentary decisions and debates?*

Wiredu: Well, suppose I think that I would like my voice to be taken into account in any decision that affects me. Anybody that is going to deny this is going to have to face a question of whether they would be happy to be in a situation where decisions are taken that affects them without their interest being taken into account.

Metz: *And I might say again, yes, I would be willing to give up my voice to be heard in the case of every single policy that the government makes. So long as I have an equal opportunity in influencing decision-making over a span of time. So if there are fair and free elections and I am not in the majority but the majority are able to have their way in a limited span of time, a year or two, and if that is a more efficient process and government is able to achieve more just goals by that means, then I will be willing to forsake my having a say over every single policy, supposing just ends weren't advanced as much. How can the Golden Rule close up that kind of argument for a majoritarian conception of democracy?*

Wiredu: No, the Golden Rule doesn't decide every issue. I mean the Golden Rule is the very basis for a lot of other things. We have to argue, let's say, permissive ground and so on. Moreover, I would like to say this: I don't take the Golden Rule to be adequate for every human problem. With my class, when I say, "There used to be a Caribbean Calypso" called Lord Krishna and in one of his songs he says, suppose that you are in a boat with your wife and your mother and the boat is about to capsize and you can only save one, either your mother or your wife. Which one are you going to save? And I point out that the Golden Rule does not apply in a case like that and there are similarities in other cases.

Metz: *Then do we come to the idea that promoting well-being is next in line after the Golden Rule, or what other principles do you want to appeal to when the Golden Rule gives out?*

Wiredu: In the case that you gave, there is somebody who doesn't think that we don't get the full details, perhaps he thinks that it is not practicable for every situation to have your interest consulted and so on. But we can get to the details of the argument and we see what the basis is. If it is on grounds of practicality, that could be a reasonable position. If that person is debating with somebody who demands that in every case that should be required, then they will go into more discussion. But it won't be the Golden Rule or any similar rule, it will be more practical.

Eze: *Do you agree with Paulin Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy? If so, why would you agree with him? If not, can you give us a general perspective on what you will describe as African philosophy?*

Wiredu: Okay, that is a big question. First of all, let's take the Hountondji question. Hountondji and I agree on some issues but not on every issue. A lot of my work will fall under what he calls "ethnophilosophy", that is, my reflections on the Akan, what the Akans think, et cetera. That is the kind of thing he calls *ethnophilosophy*. So there is a disagreement

there between me and Hountondji because I think that you can do worthwhile work while studying the worldviews and also the philosophy of a whole group of people, especially if they don't have a written tradition. I am not aware of a written tradition in Ghana dating back to, say, even the seventeenth century or earlier, so that is all right. However, I agree with Hountondji when he says that philosophy must be critical. If I identify something as a view that was held by my own society in times past and so on, that doesn't make that view true or anything. I have to evaluate, I have to examine the validity of that view. Now, that is perhaps not exactly Hountonji's tone, but it is close to Hountondji in the first case.

Now, when it comes to what African philosophy is, in general, I would say that African philosophy is the investigation into various fundamental concepts for human thought. I believe that we all have (apart from perhaps idiots), we all have some conceptions of the world and it comprises a whole lot of things. We believe that we can walk on earth. I walk from here to the door without suddenly collapsing. I believe that if something happens or something else happens, I expect that there will be some causal connections and so on. There are basic concepts that we have by the fact that we are human beings that have a worldview. But, then, there are issues that make it protracted thinking when you start trying to build a coherent picture of the world. Let me increase the dimension of the worldviews a little bit. I mentioned the idea of cause and effect; we do also have the idea of ourselves as beings that can take decisions based upon some rational reflections just at the pre-philosophical level. However, when it enters your head to try to make a coherent picture of that, you soon encounter difficulties. Like, okay, if we are beings that have a free will, we can make free decisions and so on. How is that compatible with the fact that we live in a world of cause and effect? These are questions raised by philosophers, not just by ordinary persons. Now, I find that in my tradition, questions of this kind are raised. Even in those traditions where we don't have writings or written records of philosophers and only oral traditions, I find that we do raise questions of that kind. So, we have African philosophy first, because even where we only have an oral tradition, we have people that have raised questions of a philosophical kind such as I described. In some parts of Africa, we do have both an oral and written tradition. Ethiopia is a clear case. More recently, it is becoming known that in other parts of Africa like northern Nigeria, Senegal, and East Africa, we had a lot of philosophical work going on. So, African philosophy is philosophy done by Africans now as well as in the past, either through oral tradition or through written tradition.

Eze: *And you think that these "philosophies", if I use it in the plural sense, that these different worldviews can be harmonized? Like in Igbo we have a different worldview of looking at life, the Akan have a different worldview of life, can we then really generalize these competing worldviews and say that this is one single homogenous African philosophy? Can we say that this is "African philosophy" or "philosophies from Africa"? The former homogenizes while the latter allows for plurality.*

Wiredu: First of all, notice that I make a distinction between worldviews and philosophy. You get a philosophy when you investigate or you try to make a coherent picture from your worldview. Now, as to the question of generalization, that is an empirical question, and I am surprised how similar people from Africa that are far removed from mine. If you talk of groups that are near, say, Ghana, Sierra Leone, or Nigeria, and so on, there are a lot of

things that are very similar. If you take the analysis of the human personality between the Akans of Ghana and the Yoruba, it always fascinates me how similar they are. There are differences of detail, but there are enough similarities to justify speaking about a conception of a person that is common between Akans and Yorubas. You will find the same thing with the people in Sierra Leone. Now, you find the same thing though with a slight reduction of similarity between the concept of persons we have in West Africa and those that we have in Southern and Central Africa. Kagame did a study of what he called "Bantu" conceptions of person. And it is unbelievable how similar the results are. I have not read his original book because it was written in French, but I got a very substantial summary from what he was saying in English from a certain journal. And these worldviews, despite degree of differences, are very similar. So, I don't think that it is over-generalizing to speak of the African conception of a person, at least to speak of a certain distinct part of that conception. Again, Kagame did a very similar empirical study. Kagame actually studied all the languages. Now, Kagame points out that the concept of existence in the Bantu language—what he calls the "Bantu" language—the conception of existence, you always need to have an adverb to play. To say that something exists, you have to say something like *ba-ho*. And the "ho" is the special adverb. So, he says, suppose Descartes were to say, "I think therefore I am" to a Bantu, the Bantu would probably say, you are what? "I am" doesn't make sense in itself. It is going to be something that will locate you in the space. But this is exactly the same situation in Akan. In Akan, to exist is to *wo-ho*. Note that the adverb "ho" is the same in both cases, except that we say "wo" and Kagame says "ba." On an empirical basis like that, it may be possible to make generalizations. One cannot expect to make total generalizations over too many subjects. But we have a common view. In general I agree we ought to be careful when we make generalizations because Africa is a big continent and important differences might crop up as we go along.

Eze: *You are a Professor of Philosophy at South Florida, you are an African, and you are an Akan. Now, when one asks you a question with regards to your professional identity, would it be that of a Western philosopher or would you rather say that you are an African philosopher in a Western or Anglo-American tradition?*

Wiredu: You mean, would I call myself an African philosopher in an Anglo-American tradition? What does that mean?

Eze: *I am trying to explore whether you see yourself primarily as an African philosopher or a Western philosopher? Is there a conflict of identity?*

Wiredu: No, in South Florida I teach African philosophy but I also teach Western philosophy. For historical reasons, we have come into the ambit of Western philosophy also. It seems to me to make sense for an African living in a contemporary world to see what [he] can get from that tradition into which he was brought by history. I think also that it will be good for African philosophers to see what [they] can get from Eastern philosophy, but time is too short, too many deadlines, and so forth, but I think it is a reasonable objective to try to see if we can get something from Western or Eastern philosophies. So, I think that I have gotten something from Western philosophy but not everything. I think that the things that I

get from my own traditional philosophy enrich me. Also, when I get something from Western philosophy, I grill it through my conceptual framework, which is embedded, in my own language. I think if you do that, you will see that certain things in Western philosophy just won't work.